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- ART. I.—1. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. By E. C. GASKELL, Author of “Mary Barton,” “Ruth,” etc. In two volumes. New York: D. Appleton and Company. 1857. 12mo. pp. 285, 269.
2. *The Brontë Novels*. — *Jane Eyre*. *An Autobiography*. Edited by CURRER BELL (CHARLOTTE BRONTÉ). — *Shirley*. *A Tale*. By the Author of “Jane Eyre.” — *Villette*. By the Author of “Jane Eyre” and “Shirley.” — *Wuthering Heights*. By ELLIS BELL (EMILY BRONTÉ). — *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. By ACTON BELL (ANNE BRONTÉ). New York: Harper and Brothers. 1857.
3. *Agnes Grey*. By ACTON BELL (ANNE BRONTÉ).
4. *The Professor*. *A Tale*. By CURRER BELL. New York: Harper and Brothers. 1857. 12mo. pp. 330.

THE first thrill of regret which passes over the community on the death of a favorite author, in the prime of his power, is tinged with a very decided selfishness. We count the years which we thought would bring us new volumes from the same pen, and feel ourselves defrauded of a promised treasure. Our expectations have been raised by what has been achieved, and our appreciative welcome prepared for what the future might bring. This feeling is independent of any personal interest in the dead, and when that has already existed, or is subsequently awakened by circumstances, is soon merged in

a less selfish sorrow for the broken life. The genius which wrought for our delight assumes the proportions of a friend, over whom we claim the right to mourn, and upon whose memory we dwell with loving interest. Thus we take up our pen for the task we have now set ourselves, not as a cold and distant criticism would suggest, but with reverent friendliness and warmth of interest, which we believe fully warranted by the circumstances of the case. The author of "Jane Eyre" is no longer a mere abstraction to the reader's mind, but instinct with vitality and clear in individuality. We know her henceforth even better as a woman than as a writer. When we reflect that the impression made by *Currer Bell* was produced by only three works, we feel all the more deeply that the powers so carefully and conscientiously used could never, had she lived, have been desecrated by any hasty or incomplete publication, that no outside pressure would have induced hurried utterance, that the reticence which marked the past would have characterized the future, and that the high ideal before her mind would never have been lowered at the instigation of popularity or by the temptation of gain. The works already published would have been followed by others worthy of their predecessors, and if they came more slowly than our eagerness desired them, their merit would have constrained us to acknowledge that time was necessary to ripen into full maturity the fruit which boasted such rare flavor. This hope blasted, this future denied, we cling the more closely to the treasures we already possess, and turn eagerly towards every avenue for gaining knowledge of the nature which originated them, rejoicing when our cool judgment allows us to approve what our tenderness for the dead induces us to value.

The world does not need to be told that the works of an author are not always counterparts of his actual experience; we have long known that the merriest quips often come from the saddest hearts, and the most lachrymose sentimentalities from the jolliest natures; yet we feel, nevertheless, that in the life of an author we are to search for the secret of his power, the clew to his imaginings, the explanation of his literary position. When we criticise a work with no personal knowledge of the writer, we obtain an impartiality of judgment in

some respects, at the expense of thorough and sympathetic understanding of his point of view, his qualifying circumstances and his personal enthusiasms and prejudices. The blunders of inference which follow upon letting loose the astuteness of professed critics over an unknown country, are often ludicrous, sometimes disastrous. The knowledge of an author's life, by increasing our power of throwing ourselves into his position, sheds light on many a dark passage, explains many a seeming paradox, and more than compensates for the loss of entire impartiality of judgment, with its accompanying indifference of criticism. Indeed, a perfectly impartial criticism is almost impossible, since the desire to criticise at any length implies that the heart is interested in favor of, or the feelings excited against, the work in question. In the absence of this motive power we can furnish only a tame and spiritless statement, little better than a table of contents. The critic who throws himself *con amore* into his subject is not necessarily warped out of his critical perpendicular, and a genial appreciation of the merits of his author or a quick perception of his defects need not degenerate into fulsome flattery or bitter invective.

In the search for information concerning an author, we are fortunate when we come upon a biography like that which Mrs. Gaskell gives us of Miss Brontë. We find in it, not only the satisfaction of an urgent curiosity upon many points of personal history, but a key to Currer Bell's fictions, which sends us to their reperusal with a new and more tender interest. And in the glimpses given of the sisters Emily and Anne, — those strange mental organizations in which peculiarities were carried almost into deformities, — we learn to account for the strange elements present in their works. We find the atmosphere of the novels predominating in the "Life," — the "counterfeit presentment" of persons and incidents known personally or by tradition, placed before us in the romances. This is especially true in Charlotte's case; for her mind was less narrow by nature, and her life more varied in feeling and in action, than that of either of her sisters. The most repulsive and the most contradictory of her fictitious characters prove to be but the careful elaboration of outlines sketched

from her own circle of experience. In the vivid description which Mrs. Gaskell gives of Charlotte Brontë's life, we are surprised to find how little the novelist strained her privilege of coloring and intensifying the elements of character about her. Those who dwell amidst the constant friction of city life, or are subjected to steady attrition among their fellows, can with difficulty conceive how the sharp points and rough edges of character remain, and even become more prominent, in circumstances of isolation. This is as true of communities as of individuals; and however fond we may be of imagining model republics existing in isolated positions, which protect them from the enervating breath of general luxury, it is very certain that such protection must be purchased with the loss of much in the way of refinement of tone and universality of development. Hereditary traits become intensified, whether they are virtues or vices; and, alas for poor human nature! the vices too often grow more luxuriantly than the virtues; or, at best, virtues are more quiet in their development, and have less concentrated power over the imagination and hold upon the memory. Household crimes of the past are whispered fearfully by the winter fireside, long after household virtues have passed out of remembrance. All contracting influences are strengthened when they act unchanged upon generation after generation; social laws bend under the unchecked power of the hereditary rich and the exhausted energies of the hereditary poor; and public opinion sides with the strong, or contents itself with low and timid whispers of ineffectual disapprobation. To these circumstances we must look for an explanation of the state of society in that isolated portion of England in which the Brontës were born and reared, and for which we must make due allowance in reading their works.

The biographer of Currer Bell had a very delicate and a very difficult task to perform. The public naturally craved the most explicit details concerning the externals of a life of whose interior workings it had caught glimpses through the half-revealing, half-concealing medium of what we may term autobiographic novels. This explicitness would necessarily involve many persons who might object to being called

before the world, and bring out in strong relief particulars of such a nature that prudence and courtesy demand silence even when indignation clamors for utterance. The temptation to speak is the greater in this instance, for the reason that the sufferings of Charlotte Brontë were precisely those portions of her life which called forth her most glowing words. The morbid delicacy of feeling which some of them induced, gave rise to her most thrilling revelations of spiritual susceptibility. The capacities for happiness, the aspirations for affection, so crushed and lacerated, sent forth the deepest cry of anguish. Fully to explain all the circumstances would be to arraign individuals connected with them; but the severity with which a tribunal of justice may ferret out evidence and pass its definitive sentence is forbidden to those who would fain probe the depths of moral torture. Yet a certain inferential condemnation ensues from those necessary revelations which the simplest and most delicate statement of incidents involves, and the occasional transcending of strict limits may be pardoned to the enthusiasm of personal friendship.

We propose, in the first place, to examine the memoirs which Mrs. Gaskell furnishes us, with special reference to those portions which tell most powerfully upon the development of Miss Brontë's mind and heart, and then to turn, with the light thus thrown upon the author, to a scrutiny of her works. We believe that this knowledge of the individual — always more necessary in judging of a woman's comparative position than of a man's, since her sphere of feeling is less rounded by external action — is in a peculiar degree necessary to a full comprehension of Currer Bell's romances. We also believe that many of the criticisms made in times past, in the total absence of such knowledge, would now, were it possible, receive very decided modification, and the general judgment in regard to her works become even more favorable than their popularity proves it to be already.

Mrs. Gaskell prefaces the memoirs themselves with some explanatory sketches of the country and the people among whom Miss Brontë was born, and the environments from which her mind received its earliest and strongest impressions. This is the more necessary, owing to the very striking peculi-

arities of Yorkshire and its inhabitants. Nothing less than an account of these peculiarities as they manifested themselves half a century ago, could prepare one to believe in them at a later period, or within the childhood of the Brontës, and even then it requires some effort to conceive that such relics of barbarism and such savageness of customs could exist anywhere in England in this nineteenth century. These facts, however, once established, the inevitable inferences which follow are our first help towards a complete comprehension of the reason why, when the Brontës described the men and women whom they saw, or with whose histories they were familiar through immediate tradition, the great world should have felt its delicate nerves shaken at what it regarded as exaggerated pictures of coarse and hard humanity. The persons whom the sisters met in their daily walks were quite as rough and odd as those they put upon their imaginary stage, and within the limits of their own family strange contrasts appeared, while the tales with which their old nurse nourished their childish imaginations were weird as any entwined into their fictions.

The incidents which Mrs. Gaskell relates as confirmation of the ferocity and coarse cruelty of this people, we have not room to quote; but some of them are startling and repulsive in the highest degree. And though with kindness of intention she musters a small array of compensating virtues, which appear upon a thorough study of the nature of the people, they fail to soothe our indignant feelings, which revert again and again to the graphic but hateful narrative.

To this rude and desolate country Mr. Brontë, the father of Charlotte, brought his young wife, and amid the cheerless and forlorn scenes of lonely country life in Yorkshire the wife soon ended her days, leaving behind her six desolate little children in that dreary stone parsonage of Haworth, the mere picture of which we cannot contemplate without a shiver at its forlorn aspect. The father, an Irishman and a good but stern man, was quite as eccentric as any character which his daughter's imagination ever drew. Full of energy, but with little tenderness, charitable and laborious in his vocation as clergyman, but taciturn and solitary in his ways, he left his

motherless children to nestle together and to look only to one another for sympathy and endearments. In other respects he seems to have been a good father, and to have won the esteem and reverence of his family. His hygienic theories, however, were carried out, we fear, very much to the detriment of little ones who appear to have needed precisely the opposite of his Spartan method of treatment. His naturally violent temper, though under sufficient control to prevent him from indulging in angry words or blows, found vent in the most ludicrous manner. He is described as working off, "his volcanic wrath by firing pistols out of the back door in rapid succession," as burning up the hearth-rug and appearing to enjoy the stench thereof, and as sawing off the backs of the chairs during another *accès de fureur*. He did not approve of any elegance of apparel, and therefore threw into the fire some gay shoes belonging to the children, and cut into shreds a silk dress presented to his wife, which shocked his fastidiously plain taste. What his children must have thought while these oddities were before their eyes, we may well imagine, when we remember the wonderful precocity of their minds. Some of the peculiarities of the father, modified by the gentleness of the mother, may be traced in the children.

Some time after the mother's death, a sister of hers came to take charge of the motherless brood. She was an estimable but not very lovable woman, who inspired the respect rather than the affection of those about her. Her natural austerity was increased by her dislike of Yorkshire, which she never conquered, though she remained there till her death. She taught the little girls to excel in all household accomplishments, initiating them into all the mysteries of cooking and embroidery. The reader will remember many passages in the novels, where these matters find honorable mention. In the absence of all other children's society, and without any of the toys and picture-books which fairly smother the infants of more (or less?) favored regions, these little folks read the newspapers of the day, discussed the Parliamentary debates, and formed their conversation and their employment upon the models of the older persons about them. Their precocity, which would have been apparent under any circumstances,

became absolutely marvellous under the strange forcing process to which they were subjected. The child-nature was lost, if indeed it ever had any existence, and the five sisters and one brother formed a community of their own, quite unlike that of any other known nursery. Even their plays, when they condescended to amuse themselves, were rather the recreations of mature minds than the frolic nonsense of childhood. In the course of time four of the sisters were sent to a school at Cowan's Bridge, of which all that need be said is, that it was the original of Lowood in "*Jane Eyre*"; but the two elder ones died in the course of the first year, and the two younger ones were soon after removed from the school. Mrs. Gaskell's account of the life at this school is no less painful, though less dramatic, than its counterpart in the novel. Upon the death of her older sisters, little Charlotte, though a mere child, assumed the responsibilities of chief in the diminished group, and seems to have comprehended her position immediately, and devoted herself to the duties consequent upon it with unswerving fidelity. She remained at home till she had entered her fifteenth year, exercising herself industriously in the household tasks prescribed by her aunt, or busied in the preparation of various literary compositions, which grew so numerous, that in 1830, when she was but fourteen, she made out "*A Catalogue of my Books*," which were twenty-two in number. These little volumes, written in a tiny hand, and containing from sixty to one hundred pages each, were devoted to a great variety of topics, and consisted both of prose and verse. In 1831 she was sent to Roe-Head, to a school very different from the Cowan's Bridge abomination, where she remained for a year, and formed some of her strongest and most valuable friendships. Taking every possible advantage of the educational opportunities here afforded her, Charlotte made great progress, and afterwards returned to the school in the capacity of teacher. During her stay at Roe-Head, her observant mind, always active, gathered in impressions of local scenery and personal character, and her memory stored itself with traditional lore, all of which were destined to form the material of her future works. Her duties as teacher were extremely arduous, and her life painfully monotonous; but she bore it

with courage, though she mourned deeply over the condition of her sister Emily, at that time teaching in a school at Halifax, and worn down with "hard labor from six in the morning to eleven at night, with only one half-hour of exercise between." Charlotte's health gave way entirely, and she returned home. Emily also succumbed to the hardships of her lot. At this time the sisters appear to have made their first decided literary efforts, and letters, asking counsel, were sent to Southey and Wordsworth. Southey's reply is given at length, and, while mildly discouraging, is marked with the gentle kindness and courtesousness of his nature. Baffled in this hope, Charlotte set herself resolutely to work again in a situation totally repugnant to her, and became a private governess. In this sphere she accumulated experiences and bore sufferings, which, calling out no loud or frequent complaint at the time, fermented within her, and burst forth long afterwards in her works.

It is not known that her experiences at this time were very unlike those of other women in the same social position, — or rather, to speak more correctly, in the same absence of all position. The sufferings, the mortifications, and the sorrows of private governesses have been too long a favorite theme of English novelists, to leave any possible aspect of the mournful topic untouched. Why the abuses interwoven into that system of education are not resolutely eradicated by public indignation, or, if that is impossible, why the system itself is not exchanged for something more genial and humane, can be explained only by that peculiar tenacity with which the English, as a nation, cling to their established customs, and the apathetic obstinacy with which they regard any suggestion of change. Miss Brontë, being condemned by Fate to be a governess, must meet with the same trials and annoyances under which the rest of the class have long groaned ; but she being also a woman of genius equal to her susceptibility, having the gift of utterance as well as of endurance, the world has to thank her persecutors indirectly for much that glows in her writings. What persons are within themselves, influences the expression of the life far more than the incidents which make its daily tenor. Commonplace persons appear to meet

with only commonplace experiences, because they have no immortal fire within to melt the ore of life into flowing metal, no creative inspiration to mould it into form and beauty. Genius makes from that same ore a bronze statue of glorious proportions, for the world to admire, and transforms into passionate utterance the incidents which in an ordinary life would come to naught, or at most cause only a transient emotion. The materials in the two cases are not unlike, but the power at work upon them is, in one case, that of a Prometheus, in the other that of an ignorant child. We find Charlotte Brontë always busy in "making out," from all that she sees and all that she feels, half-real and half-ideal creations, and moulding her acquired ideas in the crucible of her fancy. She treasures all the traditions of a country rich in startling tales of the past; she fills her mind with pictures of long-gone scenes; the mansions which she passes in her daily walks are peopled to her sight with forms unseen by common eyes; and even the ordinary incidents of the monotonous life about her reveal to her a darker tragedy and a deeper pathos. To such a nature as Currer Bell's nothing was without signification. To the plain, near-sighted, silent woman, nature found a way to reveal its secrets and reward her worship; to the introverted mind of the morbid dreamer grew mysterious insight into the phenomena of all varieties of minds; to the busy plodder amid daily drudgeries came eagle-winged thoughts of freedom and wildest soaring; and over the pent-up affections of the taciturn and diffident governess swept whirlwinds of passion, by turns the stormiest agony and the most rapturous bliss.

Discouraged and harassed by a mode of life so utterly at variance with their instincts, enfeebled in health by longing homesickness, which always hung about them when absent from their own breezy moors, the sisters determined to attempt taking a school by themselves, hoping to increase their pecuniary resources, at the same time that they secured the happiness of remaining together. This plan was never crowned with success; but the endeavor to carry it out led to a new and important change in the life of Charlotte and Emily, who, for the purpose of better fitting themselves to

become teachers, went over to Brussels, and entered the *pensionnat* of Monsieur and Madame Héger. There, by unremitted application, they obtained a thorough knowledge of the French language, and increased their acquirements generally. To this sojourn in Belgium we are indebted for Currer Bell's "Villette." They were called home, after an absence of ten months, by the sudden illness and death of their aunt. Emily never returned to Brussels; but Charlotte soon after assumed the position of English teacher in the same establishment, so that her whole residence on the Continent extended over a period of two years. Her experience during this time is set down so vividly in "Villette," that, once read, it can never be forgotten. Disagreeable as her life necessarily was in some respects, it was not without its pleasant side, if only for the reason that it afforded her in full measure those advantages she courted so much. Her mind was maturing in all ways, to an extent of which she herself was probably hardly aware; and if her solitary hours and forlorn destitution of affection and sympathy fostered the morbid susceptibility of her disposition, we can hardly quarrel with them, since the most powerful psychological portions of "Villette" could never have come into existence without them. Even her *devoirs* in French composition show the power of her mind, which breaks through the difficulties imposed by a foreign tongue.

During her whole stay at Brussels, Charlotte spared no efforts to avail herself of every opportunity of intellectual improvement, though her delicate health and sensitive temperament must often have made her tasks difficult of accomplishment. Her intellectual growth would have done credit to a far more robust physical organization. She won the especial respect of Monsieur Héger, and seems to have felt for him a great degree of reverence and grateful friendship. His peculiarities of manner and temper, his strong religious and charitable feelings, and his odd irritability, are shadowed forth in Paul Emanuel, a hero who, though he may have failed to become popular among ordinary hero-worshippers, has his select number of admirers, and was evidently intended by the author to win our esteem and our liking. The few

persons outside the walls of the *pensionnat* with whom Miss Brontë became acquainted, the local scenery, the historic associations, were all analyzed and all appropriated by her, with little plan, perhaps, of future use, but simply from the inevitable and irresistible tendency of her mind thus to examine, and as it were hold in solution, those scenes and incidents which with others pass unnoticed in daily routine. Thus the lonely home of the *grandes vacances* became to her a prominent and frightful reality of experience, not to be dismissed afterwards from the memory with a shrug of the shoulders and an exclamation of disgust, but to induce nights of weary sleeplessness, to bring on fever and desperation as they dragged their slow length along, and years afterwards to recur with undiminished force, and dictate those strangely fascinating chapters on "The Long Vacation" in "Villette." The fact also of her stanch Protestantism, amid so much obtrusive Romanism, added fuel to the fire of her inner excitement, and provoked all her antagonism. She had no sympathy with, no admiration for, the ceremonies of that Church; the *messe* was to her always "idolatrous," and "the uncompromising truth" of her character would not allow her to shrink from the maintenance of opinions, which could hardly be received with complaisance by those among whom she dwelt. Her position at Madame Héger's became less and less tolerable to her, and the increasing troubles at home, resulting in part from the misconduct of her brother Branwell, and in part from the threatened blindness of her father, combined with her own homesick yearnings to induce her return to Haworth.

And now ensued a long stay upon the moors, a quiet resumption of home habits and daily-recurring duties, her literary labors still pursued, silently but with undaunted courage. The story of the publication of a volume of poems by the three sisters is well known. Then followed the acceptance by a London publisher of "Agnes Grey" and "Wuthering Heights," by Anne and Emily, and the rejection of "The Professor," Charlotte's first fiction. Undismayed even by this, she commenced "Jane Eyre," and its opening chapters were written while she was in close attendance upon

her blind father. Her life was at this time as monotonous as Haworth life must necessarily be. The walk upon the moors was the most agreeable event of the day; the evening talk, when the sisters were together and the rest of the family asleep, was the charm of the night. When a naturally active and energetic intellect is placed in circumstances devoid of variety and interest, other influences, which in seasons of social excitement remain dormant, rise into importance and wield a dominating power. The phenomena of external nature, with their daily variety, — the inevitable and seemingly spontaneous changes of thought in long seasons of uninterrupted meditation, united with a sense of thralldom under a condition at variance with the impulses of the heart, — these are the influences which are set at work, and which produce in weak minds a deadness or mental paralysis, and in strong ones a feverish restlessness. Traces of this restlessness are occasionally apparent in Charlotte Brontë; but the steadfast courage with which she combated both this and the miserable ill-health aggravated by it call forth our esteem and admiration. Indeed, a quiet, undemonstrative energy was one of "Currer Bell's" most marked characteristics, and the unshaken firmness with which she bore a life-long monotony, to a temperament like hers a constant martyrdom, continually displays itself upon the pages of her biography. Some of her fictitious characters are endowed with similar organizations, and possess the same power of endurance, the same reluctance to accept means of escape which in the least jar the moral sense, the same force to bear without uttering one cry till the crisis of agony is past and words can be spoken calmly. Something of her singularly self-contained spirit is revealed in the characters of Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe. It would seem that neither of these was intended as a likeness of her nature, as she herself understood it; but most readers will discover remarkable resemblance as to the workings of the inner heart and the endurance of interior conflict and suffering. Not the least of Currer Bell's artistic talents is that which she possessed of emerging from the intense introversion which marks the conception of some of her characters, and plunging at once and vigorously into the stormiest

action and the most demonstrative passion, vividness and vitality accompanying every change in the movement.

The power of passive endurance in Miss Brontë, united with the strength of active perseverance, which she possessed in an equal degree, can alone explain the fact that this fragile and delicate woman, whose health was enfeebled by frequent illness, whose nerves were wrung by all depressing influences, and whose heart was smitten by repeated afflictions, was able to turn from the darkness about her, to rise from the exhausting minutiae of household cares and the physical fatigue of laborious attention upon others more ill than herself, to make for herself an atmosphere, full of change and of charm, in the fair land of romance, and, after a night spent in the passionate vehemence of Jane Eyre's personality, to renew the same faithful performance of daily prosaic duty. Tenderly attached to her sisters and her father, forbearing to the brother whose recklessness made his home wretched, we find her always forgetful of herself and devoted to others. The faithfulness of her devotion through those long and weary years of dismal Haworth life, varied only by rare visits made and received among her very small circle of friends, is set forth with simple pathos by her biographer, and forms one of the most touching chapters of womanly experience. Those who have been accustomed to regard Currer Bell only as an author who has dared to speak on certain topics with a plainness somewhat unusual among fashionable lady-writers, and have consequently assailed her for coarseness and immorality, will stand abashed before this record of womanly virtue and tender affection. Miss Brontë never lost her keen perception of the desolate monotony of her home-life, through familiarity with its routine. She writes to a friend: "I can hardly tell you how time gets on at Haworth. There is no event to mark its progress. One day resembles another; and all have heavy, lifeless physiognomies. . . . I feel as if we were all buried here. I long to travel; to work; to live a life of action."

To add to her depression, her eyes, which she had injured by her minute style of drawing and by her miniature handwriting, — a fac-simile of which Mrs. Gaskell introduces, —

became very troublesome, so that the fear of blindness tormented her, and her amusements, already so limited, were still further curtailed. Her father's eyes were much relieved by a surgical operation undertaken in compliance with Charlotte's earnest entreaties. Her own eyes never entirely recovered, and she was often unable to use them for reading or for writing, — a deprivation keenly felt by her, and doubly distressing as an aggravation of her loneliness. Her brother's sad and disgraceful history was another bitter ingredient in her cup of sorrow. The story is simply and plainly told by Mrs. Gaskell, and clearly explains how the author of "Wildfell Hall" should have known so well the details of a vicious life. The suffering and mortification which he inflicted upon his innocent sisters were no slight addition to his offences against virtue.

In the mean time the novels of the two younger sisters had been accepted, as we have seen, and Charlotte's returned upon her hands. As "The Professor" is now before the public, an opportunity is afforded for judging of the critical acumen of the six London publishers who declined to usher it into the world. An indication of character quite in keeping with Currer Bell's other peculiarities is apparent in the circumstance of her using the same wrapper for her manuscript during all its pilgrimages, so that each publisher was able to see the names of his brethren who had refused it before him. "Jane Eyre," however, was doomed to a better fate, and we rejoice as we remember that the strong heart, so long unable to find acceptable utterance, at last received a worthy welcome. The graphic account by Mrs. Gaskell of Charlotte's method of composition, and of her patient fulfilment of household drudgery when her brain was on fire with the creative impulse, proves that it is by no means necessary that literary women cease to be bound by domestic laws. In the private correspondence of Miss Brontë we trace a resemblance to Jane Eyre's own style, playfulness when her heart is sore within her, resolute courage in the struggle of life, and a smile because she will not weep.

With the publication and immediate popularity of "Jane Eyre," Currer Bell entered upon an active literary career,

which, however, never prevented her from giving her wonted attention to her home duties. We find her easily assuming the dignity of a successful author, neither disdainful of praise nor elated by its novelty. Her letters at this time become doubly interesting. Her reading was extended through the kindness of her publishers, who supplied her with books otherwise inaccessible to one in her isolated position, and her mind seized with avidity, yet with discrimination, the food placed within its reach. Her criticisms are keen and pithy, and show a ready grasp of whatever subject she took up. "Jane Eyre" was published in October, 1847, at which time Miss Brontë was thirty-one years of age.

Owing to the confounding of the pseudonymes of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, and the consequent mistakes of the publishers, Charlotte and Anne determined to go to London to establish beyond a doubt their separate existence. They remained but three days in the great city, and every circumstance of their stay is harmonious with the individuality which they have already asserted so strongly before the mind of the reader. The next year Branwell died, and Charlotte writes to a friend: "All his vices were and are nothing now. We remember only his woes." This was in October, and the following December Emily also was taken. The story of her last days is unsurpassed in tragic pathos; we read almost with horror of her struggle against her inevitable doom. "Stronger than a man, simpler than a child, her nature stood alone. The awful point was, that, while full of truth for others, on herself she had no pity; the spirit was inexorable to the flesh; from the trembling hands, the unnerved limbs, the fading eyes, the same service was exacted as they had rendered in health." In truth the strength of her will and the power of her resolve, joined to the peculiar tastes and tendencies of her nature, made of Emily Brontë a very extraordinary woman, and we find in her the germs of much, which, placed under more favorable circumstances, must have developed into nobility and grandeur. Sorrow followed fast on sorrow, and poor little Anne, after bravely endeavoring to resist her insidious foe, consumption, died in May, 1849, during a visit to the sea-shore, made with Charlotte, in the

vain hope of benefiting her health. Charlotte returned to her desolate home, to take up again the battle of her life, now utterly alone. She writes to her dearest friend : —

“I tried to be glad that I was come home. I have always been glad before, — except once ; — even then I was cheered. But this time joy was not to be the sensation. I felt that the house was all silent, — the rooms were all empty. I remembered where the three were laid, — in what narrow, dark dwellings, — never more to reappear on earth. So the sense of desolation and bitterness took possession of me. The agony that *was to be undergone* and *was not* to be avoided, came on.”

And again, some little time after : —

“Sometimes when I wake in the morning, and know that Solitude, Remembrance, and Longing are to be almost my sole companions all day through, that at night I shall go to bed with them, that they will long keep me sleepless, — that next morning I shall wake to them again, — sometimes, Nell, I have a heavy heart of it.”

She was at the end of the second volume of *Shirley*, when all these home afflictions came upon her. As soon as she had recovered from the first prostration of her grief, she resumed her work, and the first chapter of the third volume bears for a title, “The Valley of the Shadow of Death.” This work was soon finished, and was published just two years after “*Jane Eyre*.” It excited almost as much interest, but not quite so much severe criticism, as its predecessor. And now it began to be known who Currer Bell was, and a visit which she made at the house of her publisher, in December, brought her in personal contact with as much of the literary society of the metropolis as her shy manners and feeble health would permit. The meeting with strangers was an ordeal to which she could never accustom herself, and the excitement of a dinner-party, or even of a call, would bring on that enemy of all woman-kind, — nervous headache. She met Thackeray several times, and exchanged the strong but distant intellectual admiration she felt for him for a personal esteem and friendliness, though she still retained her power of criticism upon his works, and clearly perceived his faults. Always kindly in her own judgments, and genial in her criticisms, she felt keenly the philippics launched from some quarters at “*Jane Eyre*,” and even wept on reading a severe

review of "Shirley" in the "Times," though she uttered no remonstrances, and insisted on perusing all adverse criticisms, heroically maintaining that they "did her good."

Her history henceforth alternates between lively intellectual experiences set forth in pleasant letters to and from critics and authors, and the old routine, seldom broken, of household avocations. "All knew the place of residence of Currer Bell," says her biographer. "She compared herself to the ostrich hiding its head in the sand; and says that she still buries hers in the heath of Haworth moors; but 'the concealment is but self-delusion.'" She succeeded in accomplishing a large amount of reading, in spite of the weakness of her eyes. Solitude and sad memories made her heart often heavy; and the bleak and desolate storms so frequent in that country told fearfully upon a nature so susceptible as hers to every variation of temperature, and brought about a constant recurrence of those symptoms of consumption which were always hovering near her. The long and melancholy days and the still longer and more dreary nights dragged slowly on, exhausting mind and body in the effort to bear up against them, so bravely but so vainly made. Her imagination grew morbid, her nerves lost their vigor, her fancies conquered her reason in those lonely night-seasons, and few can imagine what she endured as she paced up and down her solitary room after all else were sleeping. The gloomy situation of the parsonage, in the midst of a churchyard "literally paved with rain-blackened tombstones," and never a healthy residence, any more than it was a cheerful one, became in the damp weather of spring fearfully unwholesome, and the family suffered constantly in health. Miss Brontë's friends were affectionately urgent for her to make them frequent visits; but her father's dependence upon her, and her own lofty sense of duty to him, prevented her from indulging in long absence from home. She was not one to leave the simplest duties unfulfilled for her own pleasure; so she clung to her old father, and plodded on in the pestilential air and among the sorrowful associations of Haworth. The shadowy forms of her dead sisters were ever by her side, and in the lone, sad night-hours her yearning for them grew so intense

as to win almost audible response to her excited mind. Every little taste of theirs was remembered, and everything about her was connected with them. The moors reminded her of Emily, whose love for them was a passionate vehemence, and she says: "Not a knoll of heather, not a branch of fern, not a young bilberry-leaf, not a fluttering lark or linnet, but reminds me of her. The distant prospects were Anne's delight, and when I look round, she is in the blue tints, the pale mists, the waves and shadows of the horizon." What wonder that her own cheek grew pale and her imagination morbid, left thus alone with these sorrowful memories! The wonder is that such a delicate organism kept any healthful action, that the harp swept by such rude gusts retained any tone of music responsive to lighter breaths. When her rarely occurring pleasures did come, when a short visit to a friend checkered the monotony of her life; we are astonished at the receptive faculty she exhibits for all the pleasure that presents itself. Her feeble frame shivers and trembles at the social ordeal; she grows nervous at meeting strangers; but her inner nature is a bold one, after all, and she is able to seize the intellectual enjoyment, and to exercise her critical and analytic powers, even when apparently overpowered by her *mauvaise honte*. After a brief sip from the cup of pleasure, the return to her gloomy home calls forth no harsher expression of the inevitable reaction of her spirits than a rare utterance like this: "I would not write to you immediately on my arrival at home, because each return to this old house brings with it a phase of feeling which it is better to pass through quietly before beginning to indite letters." Two days which she spent in Scotland were like a glimpse of fairy-land to her, and each moment of them made its own deep and distinct impression upon her fancy. Her anxiety for her father's health was constant, and openly expressed, and was reciprocated by him with the strongest solicitude on his part, when he believed her to be ill. She felt that this anxiety was injurious to them both, in leading them to think too much upon symptoms which they could not remove, and she did her best to lay aside her dread both for him and for herself. But she always spoke and wrote with unfailing interest in her father's

health, and Mrs. Gaskell says, "There is not one letter of hers which I have read, which does not contain some mention of her father's state in this respect."

Charlotte Brontë is described by her biographer as she appeared at their first meeting, as "a little lady in a black silk gown. She came up and shook hands with me at once. I went up to unbonnet, &c., came down to tea; the little lady worked away and hardly spoke, but I had time for a good look at her. She is (as she calls herself) *undeveloped*, thin, and more than half a head shorter than I am; soft brown hair, not very dark; eyes (very good and expressive, looking straight and open at you) of the same color as her hair; a large mouth; the forehead square, broad, and rather overhanging. She has a very sweet voice." And as they walk or drive in the open air she gives a "careful examination of the shape of the clouds and the signs of the heavens, in which she read, as from a book, what the coming weather would be"; and tells her new friend that she can have "no idea what a companion the sky becomes to any one living in solitude, — more than any inanimate object on earth, — more than the moors themselves." The readers of the novels cannot fail to have been struck with the many marvellous sky-pictures therein painted, and the powerful description of all weather phenomena.

During the composition of "*Villette*," Miss Brontë suffered more than ever from illness and consequent depression of spirits, so that, with the most willing heart in the world, she was unable to prepare it for the press until after long and vexatious delays. She felt conscientiously unwilling to write when her mind was below its proper tone, and she replies to the importunities of her publishers: —

"If my health is spared, I shall get on with it as fast as is consistent with its being done, if not *well*, yet as well as I can do it. *Not one whit faster*. When the mood leaves me, (it has left me now without vouchsafing so much as a word or a message when it will return,) I put by the MS. and wait till it comes back again. God knows, I sometimes have to wait long, — *very* long it seems to me."

The vigorous activity and persevering industry with which she wrote when "the mood" did come back, prove this in-

ability to have been no weak affectation, no silly desire to be flattered into the resumption of her work. "Villette" had to be written, too, with no friend near to whom she could go for sympathy and criticism, as she had before resorted to her sisters; and in a letter written at this time she says: "I can hardly tell you how I hunger to hear some opinion besides my own, and how I have sometimes desponded, and almost despaired, because there was no one to whom to read a line, or of whom to ask a counsel." Her knowledge of her own mind, and of the kind of power she possessed as differing from that of other popular novelists, is shown in a few remarks relative to "Villette":—

"You will see that 'Villette' touches on no matter of public interest. I cannot write books handling the topics of the day: it is of no use trying. Nor can I write a book for its moral. Nor can I take up a philanthropic scheme, though I honor philanthropy; and voluntarily and sincerely veil my face before such a mighty subject as that handled in Mrs. Beecher Stowe's work, 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'"

"Villette" appeared in 1852, and with this work, which more than sustains the author's previous reputation, closes Currer Bell's literary career, and we are called upon to lay aside our sympathies with her as an author, only to take them up again—if her biographer has succeeded with others as well as with ourselves, in awakening a very strong personal interest—the more decidedly with her womanly sorrows and deferred hopes. The sunshine of married life which eventually warmed the bereaved heart, and made even the old parsonage a cheerful home, did not rise unobstructed by clouds and portents. When the long-silent and patient-waiting, but much-loving Mr. Nichols, found words to speak his own heart and to waken a response in Miss Brontë's, the old Titan, her father, had so long survived his own tender feelings, that the lovers found no encouragement for their hopes from his astonished perceptions, and so decided was he in the expression of his disapproval, that Charlotte bowed her head before the storm, and the poor curate was obliged to leave both the lady of his love and the field of his labors. After a year of dutiful submission, the details of which may be imagined by all who have been witnesses of similar domestic circumstances, the

stern old father yielded, and we find Charlotte busied, with quiet trust and hope, in preparations for the modest wedding. It took place in the little church at eight o'clock in the morning, — precisely the hour (and under not altogether dissimilar circumstances of loneliness) at which little Jane Eyre was to have become Mrs. Fairfax Rochester. During the nine months of her married life, Mrs. Nichols enjoyed a serene contentment, a quiet satisfaction, quite unlike any of her previous experiences, and the sympathetic reader rejoices at every word which tells that the stout, but storm-weary heart has found a resting-place at last. We have only occasional glimpses of her home now; for the public has no right to enter. The authoress is "not at home," even though the matron remain as hospitable as before. But the shadow was never to be fairly lifted from this life; the picture was to receive only a few faint tints of cheerful coloring upon its sombre canvas; and soon after we congratulate the husband upon the possession of his wife, we are called to mourn with him over her loss. The sympathy of the world can do nothing to lighten such a bereavement; it cannot cheer the desolate home, or break the spell of bitter memories; but after the hush of reverent silence is over, it urges its claim to offer a word of respectful and earnest sympathy.

We close this sketch of the Memoirs with Mrs. Gaskell's own words:—

"If my readers find that I have not said enough, I have said too much. I cannot measure or judge of such a character as hers. I cannot map out vices, and virtues, and debatable land. . . . I turn from the critical, unsympathetic public, — inclined to judge harshly because they have only seen superficially and not thought deeply. I appeal to that larger and more solemn public, who know how to look with tender humility at faults and errors; how to admire generously extraordinary genius, and how to reverence with warm, full hearts all noble virtue. To that Public I commit the memory of Charlotte Brontë."

Mrs. Gaskell has not only given us a graphic delineation of the incidents in the life of her friend, and a clear and delicately outlined portrait of her personality, but in the very doing of this she has nobly fulfilled her own desire to vindicate and to honor the memory of Currer Bell. Without flattery, or violent

declamation, she has eulogized her friend in the most fitting and effectual manner, by simply permitting facts to speak for themselves. The best vindication of a true life is to tell the plain, unadorned history of that life. The world has a shrewd, and after all a pretty fair judgment, when it is in possession of a sufficient number of facts. The unavoidable distortion which the circumstances attending a prominent position before the public receive, from the great amount of handling they are subjected to, is best remedied by a straightforward statement from some responsible quarter. The final judgment of the community is almost always in accordance with the dictates of generosity and truth. Character, like water, finds its own level, if it have but time to settle, and we soon discover that the frothing and turmoil which lifted certain waves into apparent height, or opened caverns whose depth we could not fathom, subside when the gale is over, and allow us to estimate the true depth of the stream. Great natures never fear this subsiding process; serene as the ocean in grandeur and in depth, the sounding-line may be cast down and the plummet allowed to tell its reckoning fairly. Therefore in this *Life of Miss Brontë* the truest service has been rendered to her memory, and the best panegyric uttered over her tomb, by a simple and candid recital of the environments of a nature so peculiar, yet so noble, the endurances of a heart so tender, yet so strong, the struggles of an intellect so powerful, yet so susceptible. The literary history is a rare one, in this age when intellectual strength of all kinds rushes eagerly to the arena, when even mediocrity is unwilling to sit silent in the chimney-corner. The inner record is as strange, in its picture of steady self-denial and struggle, when the heart, sensible of its own weakness and of the strength of its adversary, the imagination, still waged battle against morbid fancies and nervous depression, and, though sometimes conquered, refused to yield. Few persons would have felt the pressure of filial duty so strong as to prevail against such an array of hostile circumstances. With every temptation to leave a desolate and sickly home, and go where honor and the hope of renewed health brightened the prospect, the courage and devotion which could sustain Charlotte Brontë through those long years upon

the Yorkshire moors was no small virtue. We learn from her works, even better than from the occasional outbreaks in her private correspondence, how varied and how eager were her longings and her capabilities. The thirst for action, the yearning for change, the power of emotional enjoyment, the intelligent desire to travel, are all revealed to us in her fictions, though jealously guarded and conscientiously repressed in her daily life.

Few who read the Brontë novels when they first appeared could have suspected, in ever so faint a degree, the strangeness of the private history which lay concealed behind the friendly shelter of those oracular names. It is questionable whether the criticism which attacked them from some quarters so ferociously and so blindly did not, in the end, prove a benefit to them. It drew the more attention to the defects indisputably existing, in the works of the younger sisters especially, but with that attention has come a more impartial judgment and a higher award of praise; for the knowledge that the authors painted life as it lay around them in their daily path is sufficient refutation of the charge, that they revelled in coarseness for coarseness' sake, and drew pictures of vice in accordance with their own inherent depravity. The materials were not selected by them, but thrust upon them by circumstances clamorous for utterance. The narrowness of their general world-knowledge could hardly be suspected by themselves. They probably did not regard their sphere as an exceptional one, but supposed that in their circle they saw, in little, what the world was in large, and when their imaginations pictured fairer scenes and softer natures and gentler emotions, then they fancied that they were straying into realms of impossibility. And looking at these novels in the strong daylight cast upon them by our study of the hearts and brains in which they had their birth,—no longer mere creations of an imagination which leaves a cheery social circle at its will, to retire to the study and indulge its untrammelled powers, able to return at any moment to healthful and happy influences from without,—they come to us as the very outpouring of pent-up passion, the cry of fettered hearts, the panting of hungry intellects, restrained by the iron despotism of adverse and unconquerable circumstance.

Few novels have called forth, even in these days of violent literary sensations, such decided opinions and such contradictory criticisms as "Jane Eyre." Upon its first reading no one seemed able to pronounce a moderate judgment. Some were enthusiastic in admiration, others rabid in detestation. All possible merits and all conceivable defects were discovered in it. Immorality, coarseness, and unnaturalness were seen by some, while others beheld only a brilliantly colored picture of the human heart. Critics fell upon it, for it challenged criticism; sagacity speculated upon it, for it defied surmise; explanations were hazarded without contradiction, for the author remained silent, and apparently undisturbed by the commotion awakened. Some readers traced only the bold, broad strokes of a masculine hand; others discerned the touch of a woman's delicate fingers; and the wise ones declared it the production of a brother and a sister, not the effort of any single mind. Like a meteor, it swept across the literary heavens, drawing towards it the gaze of thousands.

The public judgment still remains somewhat undecided as to the tendency of "Jane Eyre," viewed simply in its moral aspect, and this is, perhaps, so long as the majority is on the side of a favorable judgment, no small testimonial to the general truthfulness and power of the story. For the same result ensues upon actual occurrences about us, when the circumstances are peculiar and in any way tinged with romance. Parties are formed for and against, champions are full of enthusiasm and faith, adversaries of bitterness and condemnation, and the judgment of those who wish to be impartial remains long suspended. The situations in "Jane Eyre" are powerfully drawn and brilliantly contrasted; but there is nothing impossible in the circumstances, and we are able to follow every change of scene, and to trace the working of each heart with understanding interest. To those who track "little Jane" over the stony road of her temptation, and go forth with her as she goes into the desolate world, impelled by the unerring instinct of her conscience, no further search for moral power will be necessary.

The book has been too universally read and too fully criticized.

cised to need more than a passing notice from us in regard to its literary merit. But there are several points wherein our present knowledge of the author decidedly modifies, and others in which it totally changes, opinions passed upon it in the absence of such knowledge. Not long after the publication of the work, the world outside concluded that it was in great measure autobiographic; but this, so far from uniting the different opinions, only placed the battle upon a new ground, and the writer became as fruitful a topic for discussion as the work itself, while the point where truth blended with fiction was decided at the pleasure of the critic. We now know it to have been autobiographic chiefly in that sense in which true genius throws its very self into its work, pours its lifeblood through its creation, making it throb with vitality, and then, by right of kingship, calls its conquered territory by its own name. The first part of "Jane Eyre," the child-life of the heroine, deserves a more special notice than it is apt to receive; for the more rapid and tumultuous play of passion that succeeds obliterates the impression made by it. It is, however, artistic in the highest degree, and, viewed as a prelude to the main plot, is almost unequalled in its preparatory movement. Every stroke of the pencil which paints the heroine as formed by nature and influenced by circumstance, is of value in sketching the precise outline which is afterwards filled up. There are no waste lines or uncertain etchings, and the fidelity with which the first conception of character is clung to is quite marvellous. The childhood of Jane, with its embryo qualities, its nascent strength, its nervous imaginings, and its strong antagonisms, develops in steady preparation for the fervid passion-life of the woman. The strong but long-repressed impulse, the passionate heart, the conscience and right principle dominant over both by virtue of native vigor alone, take us into regions of struggle, and unveil to us a conflict which romance-writers have usually left untouched, or but weakly portrayed. It is somewhat singular that this new and fascinating field of romance should have been selected by one living far from all literary competition, and with only her own judgment to decide upon its fitness. It was a kind of literary clairvoyance

which enabled Currer Bell to see that the time was ripe for such utterances. Novel-readers now-a-days are not satisfied with pictures of external and social life, however brilliantly colored they may be, or however various in style. The demand — to speak in mercantile parlance — is for a better article. We ask for deeper insight into character, for the features of the mind and heart rather than of the face and figure. Heroines cease to be miracles of beauty, yet prove themselves still powerful to charm; heroes are no longer of necessity stalwart and Herculean, yet they are still victors in the life-arena. The author plays the part of anatomist, and dissects heart, brain, and nerve, to lay them before the reader for examination and analysis. Perhaps Thackeray may be regarded as the most skilful in this dissection, though he enjoys the work more as if he were pulling an enemy to pieces with malice aforethought, than as a surgeon regarding the result only in a scientific light. Currer Bell is more genial than Thackeray, and never loses her faith in the heroic element of humanity. She delights and interests us in persons who are neither magnificently handsome nor superlatively magnanimous, but who have warm human hearts and active minds, and the battle of whose life is no ignoble struggle, though it may be a silent and single-handed one. It is this single-handed conflict, indeed, that she delights in, and depicts with greatest power, believing, as she says herself, that “Men and women never struggle so hard as when they struggle alone, without witness, counsellor, or confidant; unencouraged, unadvised, and unpitied.” The reader of Miss Brontë’s life may judge whether or not she knew what such a lonely life-battle really was.

In “Jane Eyre,” as the first positive outburst of long-repressed vitality, we might excuse much more violent demonstrations than we find. The reticence so evident in Currer Bell’s personal character often asserts itself in her writings, and although at times the volcano bursts forth, and hot lava-streams scorch the air, yet we feel that but a small portion of the internal fire finds its way to the surface. We hardly need to be told that a large part of “Jane Eyre” was written in a wonderfully short time. The whole movement of the

Thornfield life betokens an irrepressible impulse in the author, and establishes in the mind of the reader a confidence similar to that we acquire in a great musician, whom we have heard successfully surmounting difficult passages of his art; breathing freely once more, we lay aside all anxiety for the future, certain that the power will be equal to the strain made upon it. The characters in "Jane Eyre" are stronger than most of the surrounding circumstances, to which, with consummate skill, they are made to seem to yield. It is in the accumulation of circumstances tending in one direction, and the indomitable will of the heroine which breaks this linked chain when the crisis comes, that we find the moral of the tale. Her moral strength and her unswerving instinct are out of the range of ordinary minds, as the sphere of her conflict is removed from commonplace environments. Isolated alike from restraint and from assistance, from praise and from blame, she is clothed in a God-given armor of proof, and wins the victory in the very strength of her woman's weakness. Natures like hers present extremes and approach paradox; strength and vigor of action in a crisis are balanced by impressionableness and superior receptivity for the magnetic force in others, producing a sort of fascinated submission to a certain point, at which the tremendous revulsive power is awakened. In Rochester a study of another kind is placed before us, as successfully managed, though less admirable in itself. Indeed, he makes no attempt to win our admiration, but he gains from us the somewhat surly liking which would suit him best were he aware of it. We can even understand how he managed to "suit little Jane" "to the inmost fibre of her being." Knowing the difficulties of his position, and the original and acquired faults of his character, we judge his short-comings rather as we do those of our own prodigal sons, for whom our hearts yearn and our lips frame excuses, than as judges on the bench do those of criminals whose antecedents are nothing to them. This may be wrong, but it is true to human nature, which never can divest itself of these warpings of judgment, or fail to discover the under-tone in the Rochester nature, and believe in its nobility while it condemns its errors. The predominant feeling is, that the nature is bent out of its

true course by adverse influences, not that it loves best of itself a distorted growth, and we keep hoping for calmer airs to allow it to rise erect once more. In St. John, the third type of character, self-denial soars (paradoxical as it may seem) into an intense selfishness; and in laying aside all the humanizing and pleasurable influences within and around him, he immolates others at the shrine of self as remorselessly as Rochester's eager and impulsive selfishness would do. Jane in both instances enjoys the struggle with their iron wills; ultimate victory we are sure must be with her, and we watch the contest with faith in our chosen champion. Like David with the Philistine, she takes no sword too large for her handling, nor tries to wield a lance too heavy for her strength, but with the small stone in the sling she slays her adversary, she herself hardly knows how. There is no bravado in her onset, no panoply of war, and her nerves tremble though her heart is strong, when the Goliath of her battle shakes the ground with his terrible tread. Like David also, she can return to the tending of her sheep, no whit puffed up by the great deed she has done. She has mounted no stilts upon which she cannot remain, yet from which it is mortifying to descend, and ordinary mortals are not afraid of her, though she has fought with and slain giants.

The most prominent artistic defects in the work are, in our opinion, the too highly colored pictures of the physical distress endured by Jane after leaving Thornfield, and the somewhat hackneyed melodrama of the discovery of her cousins in the persons of her chance benefactors, and her subsequent acquisition of a fortune. The former removes our interest to a new range of antagonistic experiences without relieving the tension, for the introduction of starvation and physical exposure as additional suffering for the lacerated nature does not harmonize with the general effect, or add force to the *dénouement*; and the latter detracts from the generally unique management of the characters and the plot.

Miss Brontë was always keenly alive to the attacks made upon "Jane Eyre," and it is certain that any trenching upon the limits of delicacy or of morality was far from her thought, and that, in telling her story as it arose in her imagination, her

obedience to the truth of her perceptions of humanity is as complete when she paints its sins as when she dwells upon its virtues. If the alternative is to be true to the life-picture she tries to paint, even by confounding our perceptions with our sympathies, as she sees them constantly confounded in those around her and in her own self, or to sacrifice the fidelity of her coloring in order to throw into stronger relief the line between wrong and right, her decision as an artist may be different from that of a political economist. The public voice has declared in favor of retaining the faithful picture, and there are those who do not despair of finding in it profitable study. It is not always in those works which make the loudest claims as moral utterances, that the most searching truth and the keenest strength are to be found.

The general tone of "Shirley" is somewhat unlike that of its predecessor; the characters are more numerous, the scenes more varied, the interest less concentrated. It lacks the impetuous impulse, the passionate glow, the lava-rush towards a single point, and gives us instead, more changing tableaux, more general friction, wider varieties of emotion. It retains the spiciness of seasoning however; the viands are still of racy flavor and delicate concoction, but we detect more common and familiar ingredients in them. We still have vivacious conversations sparkling with repartee, descriptions quite Turner-like in their brilliancy of painting, and touches of deep pathos side by side with sunny and gleeful scenes. In the opening chapters we have a rough "charcoal sketch" of characters, a bold outline of coarseness quite unlike the usual efforts of the feminine pen in such directions. We are glad to learn from the "Life" that the curates did not originate in the imagination of Miss Brontë, or derive their absurdities from any desire on her part to cast a slur upon the profession to which they belong. The characters in "Shirley" are nearly all of them drawn from life, and their behavior under the circumstances created for them by the author is in perfect keeping with the tendencies which her analysis of their characteristics enabled her to discover and set in motion.

It is pleasant to trace the delicate revelations of Miss Brontë's own tastes and habits in her writings. We find

her love of nature, her keen perception of the changing moods of earth and sky, and all her atmospheric susceptibilities, continually peeping out. She sets it down against one of her characters in "Shirley," that he "was not a man given to close observation of nature, he could walk miles on the most varying April day, and never see the beautiful dallying of earth and heaven, never mark when a sunbeam kissed the hill-tops, making them smile clear in green light, or when a shower wept over them, hiding their crests with the low-hanging, dishevelled tresses of a cloud"; and we feel directly that Currer Bell neither likes, nor means that her readers shall like, that man. The heroine in "Shirley" was intended as an impersonation of Emily Brontë, as her sister fancied she would have shown herself under more genial circumstances than those which surrounded her in reality. We detect the touch of a loving finger in the arrangement of the drapery around this peculiar figure. That incident in the romance which has been condemned¹ as too melodramatic,—the bite of the mad dog,—is an exact transcript of a similar experience on the part of Emily Brontë. Caroline Helstone represents a much-loved friend of Charlotte, and is evidently a favorite with the author, though a stronger contrast than that between such a disposition and her own Jane Eyre-ish nature cannot well be imagined. She gives us in the two Moores men nearly as selfish as Rochester and St. John, and endowed with the power which selfish men almost always possess when they are shrewd and energetic. They obtain that which they really set their hearts upon having. It is undeniable that Currer Bell's heroes love themselves very much even in loving their mistresses. Having acknowledged this, or any other element of character in her creations, she never avoids for them any legitimate consequence of its existence, never shrinks from any situation into which it brings them, from fear of jarring upon the prepossessions of the reader. Inexorable as Nemesis, she forces upon them the mortifications and the disasters which are their due. Few writers would have dared the strain upon our liking given in the mercenary love-making of Robert Moore to Shirley, since Robert is intended to win our respect on the whole; but this was the

natural consequence of the premises established in Robert himself, and we have to go through it as we may, and get over it as he did. In the delicately painful descriptions of illness we trace the experience of Charlotte Brontë by the bedside of her dying sisters; and there is a frequent tone of sadness in "Shirley," which tells us that the author is by no means sitting in unclouded sunshine. The characters arrive at conclusions which we feel that the writer herself has reached, and in passages like the following, we feel that she speaks her own carefully wrought-out philosophy.

"I believe—I daily find it proved—that we can get nothing in this world worth keeping, not so much as a principle or a conviction, except out of purifying flame, or through strengthening peril. We err; we fall; we are humbled,—then we walk more carefully. We greedily eat and drink poison out of the gilded cup of vice, or from the beggar's wallet of avarice; we are sickened, degraded; everything good in us rebels against us; our souls rise bitterly indignant against our bodies; there is a period of civil war; *if the soul has strength, it conquers and rules thereafter.*"

In this conflict of life within itself in which Currer Bell finds the secret of progression, the labor of the soul upon itself and the fulfilment of its appointed work, she is very skilful to interest us and powerful to reveal its movement. We feel that the hard discipline of her men and women is like that which we make for ourselves, and that the process by which they struggle into greater freedom is that by which we must ourselves emerge from bondage. "Shirley" excited nearly as much attention as "Jane Eyre," and its admirable portraiture of Yorkshire people and scenery led to the detection of its author's identity.

In 1852 "Villette," Currer Bell's last work, was published. In this novel the scene of action is removed from England to the Continent, it being, as we have seen, a transcript of her own residence in Belgium. In some respects "Villette" is her most remarkable work. It possesses a more classic elegance of outline and a more delicate finish of detail than either "Jane Eyre" or "Shirley." In its analysis of character it is absolutely clairvoyant. The heart of Lucy Snowe,—that name so rightly chosen,—a volcano white with drifts with-

out, glowing with molten heat within,—is laid bare before us, and we may watch every flicker of the flame, every surging of the fiery billows. No anatomist could more clearly describe the physical vitality, than she has sketched this weird and wild, yet hushed and still nature. She plays in the romance a part similar to that of Charlotte Brontë herself in the world,—that of a silent, unsuspected analyzer of others. Miss Brontë says of her: “I was not leniently disposed towards Lucy Snowe; from the beginning, I never meant to appoint her lines in pleasant places”;—and we feel that ordinary sources of happiness were necessarily closed to such a one. In eloquence of language, also, “Villette” bears the palm, rich as the others were in choice diction and fitting phrases. Certain passages in “Villette” rise to a height of sublimity or reach a depth of pathos which moves the very soul. Sadness is its prevailing tone, the hand of Fate casts its shadow from the beginning, and we know that it will fall upon us at the last.

There are, however, certain defects in “Villette” which Miss Brontë herself acknowledged, though she felt powerless to remedy them. She writes to her publisher: “I must pronounce you right again, in your complaint of the transfer of interest, in the third volume, from one set of characters to another. It is not pleasant, and it will probably be found as unwelcome to the reader, as it was, in a sense, compulsory upon the writer.” The childhood of Paulina, also, promises more than it performs. She is much more of a woman when she is a child in years, than when she is fairly grown up. The queer little girl impresses us as “quite a character,” and we are disappointed when she degenerates into a mere pretty woman. The giddy, shrewd-witted Ginevra is decidedly more entertaining; her whimsicalities amuse and her absurdities provoke us as they did Lucy, while she manages to keep the same place in our liking. Paul Emanuel is a personage apparently after Miss Brontë’s own heart, and she evidently enjoys dwelling upon the dark-complexioned, irascible little man. He is strangely effective in the pages of “Villette,” and our admiration for him grows with the progressive development of the story, till our affections twine about him

whether we will or no. In regard to his fate as set forth in the last paragraph, the meaning of which has been often disputed, we have now the confirmation of its tragic import from Miss Brontë's own lips. Indeed, the romance would have been imperfect without it, every stroke of the pen prepared us for it, and the author would have been false to "all the unities" had she forced a different *dénouement*. The oracular style of its announcement was merely out of deference to her father's request, that she would "make them happy at last."

From these three works we must make up our estimate of Currer Bell's genius; for "The Professor," written first, but not published till the halo of an assured reputation surrounded the name of its author, hardly influences our judgment either way. Its faults, which are many, were redeemed in her subsequent works; its crudeness, which is great, gave place to exquisite finish both of plot and of character; and its choice of material, which reminds us of her sisters rather than of herself as we now know her, was replaced by more genial and more natural specimens of humanity. Its best portions are developed in "Villette" with more power and richer charm, and, so far as Currer Bell is concerned, the publication of "The Professor" might still have been omitted; but viewed by itself, and compared with most of the romances issuing from the prolific and not over-fastidious press of the day, we confess some surprise that the occasional flashes of talent in its details, and the unquestionable strength of its conception, should not have won the attention of some one of the publishers to whose inspection it was submitted. One inference we may certainly draw from its perusal now; if "The Professor" was destined to be followed by such works as "Jane Eyre," "Shirley," and "Villette," we might fairly have expected a rich harvest from the minds that in their first efforts could originate "Wuthering Heights" and "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall." Had the two sisters been spared, "the Brontë novels" might have become a long and illustrious list of noble fictions.

In one respect Currer Bell is not altogether unlike her favorite, Thackeray; for she selects for her *dramatis personæ*

no impossible abstractions, but warm human hearts with a fair share of imperfections, and presents us with characters which neither awe nor astonish, but which we make welcome in our family circle. But she does not, like Thackeray, become jocosely bitter over the natures she evokes, nor abuse them till the reader is roused in their defence. Sarcasm with her does not dip its arrow in poison. There is more of good than of evil in her characters; and we feel confidence in their latent heroism, draw strength from the contemplation of their struggles, and rise from the perusal of her works without bitterness. The charge of coarseness has occasionally reappeared; but, after the vindication of Mrs. Gaskell, we think it must take rank with those suggestions which recommend a "Shakespeare for the use of private families" and a mantilla for the *Venus de' Medici*.

We have room for but a brief notice of Emily and Anne and their works, but the public is familiar with their history. Emily seems to have been a very Titaness with her imperious will and her uncompromising ways, though Charlotte declares, in her delineation of her as Shirley, her faith in her capacity for more genial development. The best criticism of her novel, "*Wuthering Heights*," is by Charlotte, and that is an explanation rather than a criticism; for it is only in the author that the key to such an extraordinary story can be found. She described human nature as it appeared to her distorted fancy, and it bore the same resemblance to healthful humanity, that a faithful description of an eclipse of the sun, as seen through smoked glass, would bear to the usual appearance of that luminary. Charlotte says:—

"What her mind gathered of the real, was too exclusively confined to those tragic and terrible traits, of which, in listening to the secret annals of every rude vicinage, the memory is sometimes compelled to receive the impress. Her imagination, which was a spirit more sombre than sunny, more powerful than sportive, found in such traits materials whence it wrought creations like Heathcliff, like Earnshaw, like Catharine. Having formed these beings, she did not know what she had done. If the auditor of her work, when read in manuscript, shuddered under the grinding influences of natures so relentless and implacable, of spirits so lost and fallen,—if it was complained that the

mere hearing of certain vivid and fearful scenes banished sleep by night, and disturbed mental peace by day,—Ellis Bell would wonder what was meant, and suspect the complainant of affectation.”

This would naturally be the case with a mind capable of creating such monsters, and marshalling them coolly through all the movements of a romance; the shrinking from them must have been on their first appearance to the imagination, or not at all. The power of the creations is as great as it is grotesque, and there is, after all, a fearful fascination in turning over the pages of “*Wuthering Heights*.” It calls for no harsh judgment as a moral utterance; for its monstrosity removes it from the range of moralities altogether, and can no more be reduced to any practical application than the fancies which perplex a brain in a paroxysm of nightmare.

Anne, the younger and more gentle sister, was of a different mould; yet some passages of her “*Tenant of Wildfell Hall*” would lead us to suppose that she was gentle chiefly through contrast with her Spartan sister, and that the savage elements about her found an occasional echo from within. “*Agnes Grey*,” which appeared with “*Wuthering Heights*,” made little impression; her reputation rests upon her second and last work, “*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.” For a criticism of this, we turn again to Charlotte; for though different in scope and style from “*Wuthering Heights*,” it is nearly as inexplicable at a first glance.

“She had,” says her sister, “in the course of her life, been called on to contemplate near at hand, and for a long time, the terrible effects of talents misused and faculties abused; what she saw sunk very deeply into her mind. She brooded over it till she believed it to be a duty to reproduce every detail (of course with fictitious characters, incidents, and situations), as a warning to others. She hated her work, but would pursue it. She must be honest; she must not varnish, soften, or conceal.”

It must be owned that she did not “varnish” the horrors which she painted, and which her first readers did not suspect of causing the artist so much suffering. We can now trace the quiverings of a sister’s heart through the hateful details of a vicious manhood; and if the book fail somewhat in its

attempt to become a warning, it may at least claim the merit of a well-meant effort.

The history of the Brontë family is a tragedy throughout. Seldom have we been allowed to unveil such peculiar natures acting upon each other in one home-circle, and emerging from profound isolation into brief but dazzling publicity. With the death of Charlotte ends the sad history, and we have now only the memory of what they were. The world will not soon forget them, and would gladly offer them a more kindly tribute than it could conscientiously have given while ignorant of so much which now reveals the virtues, the struggles, and the sufferings of the sisters in that desolate Haworth parsonage. We once more thank Mrs. Gaskell for her labor of love, so gracefully executed, and echo to the letter the indignant language with which she condemns the too hastily uttered comments of ignorant criticism.

“It is well that the thoughtless critics, who spoke of the sad and gloomy views of life presented by the Brontës in their tales, should know how such words were wrung out of them by the living recollection of the long agony they suffered. It is well, too, that they who have objected to the representation of coarseness, and shrank from it with repugnance, as if such conceptions arose out of the writers, should learn, that not from the imagination, not from internal conception, but from the hard, cruel facts, pressed down, by external life, upon their very senses, for long months and years together, did they write out what they saw, obeying the stern dictates of their consciences. They might be mistaken. They might err in writing at all, when their afflictions were so great that they could not write otherwise than they did of life. It is possible that it would have been better to have described only good and pleasant people, doing only good and pleasant things (in which case they could hardly have written at any time). All I say is, that never, I believe, did women, possessed of such wonderful gifts, exercise them with a fuller feeling of responsibility for their use. As to mistakes, they stand now — as authors as well as women — before the judgment-seat of God.”